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## SOREL'S COUNTERBLAST TO THE *ASTRÉE*: A STUDY OF THE BEGINNINGS OF FRENCH REALISM IN FICTION.

IN the last number of this REVIEW an appreciation was attempted of Urfé's "*Astrée*" and the beginnings of idealism in French fiction. In this paper I propose to study its much less famous but not less significant or interesting counterpart in the work of Sorel, who has been called, not unjustly, the incarnation for his generation of the Gallic spirit, the broad-minded, healthy, often coarse and vulgar, materialistic, Pantagruelistic, and, where, as in Sorel's case, the times demand it, actively anti-idealistic tendency that one may trace throughout French fiction. To this spirit he gave expression in repeated novels and criticisms, as though he could never satisfy his conscience for the youthful idealistic indiscretion of his "*Orphise de Chrysante*."<sup>1</sup>

Sorel was a Parisian burgher, born about 1599 and dying in 1674, a man, as his friends and his works testify, of unbending independence of character, taciturn, judicious, unpartisan. Though Sorel was still young when the first seven books of "*Francion*" appeared in 1622, he had already in earlier books announced his purpose and named his hero, who is of course intended to represent the normal young Frenchman of the period. The novel, which in the ordinary edition contains over five hundred closely printed pages, is well worth reading by those who are not disturbed by a certain amount of vulgarity and a great deal of heartlessness. The hero is son of a poor Breton nobleman, brought up in a bitterly satirized Parisian school, the description of which and of the plays represented by the students forms a very interesting and considerable part of the work (Books

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<sup>1</sup> "*Orphise*" was published in 1626, but doubtless belongs to the same pre-"*Francion*" period as "*Floris et Cleonte*" and "*Philimène et Chrysaure*," short stories that had appeared in 1614; for in the preface to "*Francion*" he says these tales were followed by "*Des Affections Fidèles*" and other books, "in which his style began to change little by little."

3, 4). School over, Francion remains in Paris, earning or procuring a living by various expedients, which admit a satire of life in the capital and especially of the men of letters and booksellers there. Then the author pays his compliments to the *Précieuses* (Book 6), and then exploits the provinces in comic scenes quite worthy of the malodorous German Eulenspiegel. The scene then shifts to the court, which Francion leaves to pursue an amour with Laurette, with the unfortunate culmination of which the story had opened, and in its first form closed, the whole being constructed on the good old plan to plunge *in medias res*, and let the hero tell "what went before by way of episode," in which he is interrupted only by a second injected episode containing the early life of the rehabilitated but unreformed courtesan, Laurette. The first continuation, that of 1631, opens with an orgiastic feast, over which it will be best to draw a veil. The hero then goes on a love affair to Italy, falls a victim to intrigue there, and is obliged for a time to turn shepherd, of course for the purpose of satirizing the pastoral fiction in general and "Astrée" in particular. The last three books, including the twelfth, added in 1641, and closing with the marriage of the now sobered Francion, are filled with various Italian adventures, and seem to me to betray a certain weariness, or at least less tendency to satire.

The immediate success of "Francion" was certainly as great, probably greater, than that of "Astrée," though to read the modern literary historians one would hardly suspect it. More than sixty editions appeared in France during the author's lifetime, and it was translated into at least three foreign tongues. It was the first novel of any length that had held the mirror up to nature in France with an indulgent humor and with an ostensible moral purpose, which, however, as in the case of the similar pretensions of the Spaniards, must not be taken too seriously. Indeed, more than once the moralities with which certain episodes close have in them more of irony than of ethics. Perhaps we shall best do justice to this side of his work in his own words: "Speaking soberly," he says, "there is in it nothing but the

naïve descriptions of the vices of some men and of all their faults, to make them ridiculous and hateful, or of the tricks of others to teach us to guard ourselves from them; so if any scrupulous persons of the time find anything to object to, they should consider that this was not written for those who choose to live in a religious retreat, and who have no need to know these things, but that it was written for those who must dwell in the world and so need to know what is done there, so that they may sharpen their wits." Even in the quite outrageous eighth book, which he ingenuously advises girls and boys who have still their virginal purity to skip, he claims that he is quite powerless to avoid giving offense, because "the story would be incomplete without this, for with satiric books like this, just as it is with men, they become subjects of hate and contempt if ever they are—Bowdlerized."

About Sorel's ethical purposes we may reasonably continue to doubt. As Shakespeare might say, he doth protest too much. On the other hand, there can be no doubt whatever of his anxious avoidance of any suggestion of animadversion against the teaching of the clergy or of the Church. Even in the worst orgy the Trimalchio of the feast interrupts a guest who begins a drunken jest about a curate, with the request that he would avoid that subject, which, Sorel adds, "all the company found very right, seeing that people had already told so much about them that one could not tell anything new. So they determined not even to remember that there were any clergy in the world; and," continues the smug author, after some comment on Boccaccio, Erasmus, Rabelais, and Margaret, whom he accuses and excuses, "you will not find that I have said anything ill of priests in all this story," and that is almost literally true. The subject was either worn out or the Catholic reaction had made it seem more dangerous.

Toward morals and the Church Sorel's attitude was negative. His purpose is, first of all, to write an entertaining novel, and incidentally to satirize all the prominent social conditions (except the clergy), but especially men of letters, the æsthetes and the pedagogues. It is by no means difficult

to recognize a number of his characters among his Parisian contemporaries. It is obvious that Hortensius is meant for Balzac. Racan, Bois-Robert, and many others, are almost as plainly designated, but who may be intended by Dame Luce, first of *Précieuses* to make her appearance in satiric literature, I do not know, though the character seems too clearly drawn not to have had an original.

It is in this general picture of society, and in the actuality given to the story by its taking direct issue with a popular taste, that its claim lies to be the first French novel of manners; for, as Körting justly says, Rabelais, Margaret, and Lasalle had given a series of pictures, but Sorel gave us *a* picture. They had inclined to exaggerated caricature; he had aimed always at a faithful realism, being sure, as he said in the preface to "Francion," "that one never writes better than when one follows nature and one's genius," or, as he says further at the opening of the tenth book, in a longer passage that may serve also as an example of his satire:

Isn't it true that this comic and satiric style is a very nice, useful thing? In it all things appear in their simplicity, all actions without dissimulation; while in serious books (*i. e.*, the "Astrée" and its genus) there are certain considerations that prevent this sort of speaking, and this makes these stories imperfect and filled rather with lying than truth. And then, if one is interested in the language as really one ought to be, how can one observe it better than here? I think that in this book one can find the whole French language, and that I have not forgotten the words that the common people use, which you do not find everywhere; for in works that are too scrupulous one has not the liberty to take pleasure in them, and yet these low things are often more agreeable than the loftier. What is more, I have represented as naïvely as I could all the moods and actions of the persons whom I have introduced. . . . To be sure, I have received various advice from some people, who say that they know what is good. Some did not like one thing, some another, so that there is nothing in my book that has not been praised or blamed. How would it be possible to please everybody? For if a man of letters who has been at college likes to read of student pranks, a country squire, brought up among his dogs and horses, will take no pleasure in that, and will seek what suits his mood and position. If a man of amorous inclination delights to see a multitude of intrigues and ruses practiced by those in love, another, who cares only for wars and combats, or perhaps for pompous and serious conversation, will think all that frivolous. But let us not bother ourselves with other people's whimsies. Let us take our pleasure where we find it. And here our story begins again.

It happens to begin, by the way, with quite a characteristic passage which may serve to bring this account of Sorel's first and most famous, though perhaps not his best, novel to a close: Francion, having become per force a shepherd, is in love with a merchant's daughter, Joconde. The merchant employs him in garden work, where he finds her reading a book, and tries to scrape acquaintance by asking what she is reading. She is surprised. "You shepherds," she says, "think there is no other book in the world but a book of hours." He, however, assures her that there are hardly any good books that he has not read.

Well, then [said she], to satisfy your request I will tell you that this is a book that treats of the loves of shepherds and shepherdesses. Have you ever seen anything like that?

Yes [said Francion], I assure you that it is very agreeable to read them, especially for those who are in the country as you are, and can so easily know by experience the pleasures that are represented to you in their talk.

O how mistaken you are to think that [said she]! For if curiosity did not urge me to see the end of the adventures that are written here, I should never have the courage to finish it, for I take great delight in probability, and I can find none in a single story of a book like this. A pretty pretense: shepherds here act the philosopher and make love like the most gallant society man. What's the use of all this? Why does not the author make these people well-fed gentlemen? In that position, if he made them perform miracles of prudence and rhetoric, one would not be taken aback as at a prodigy. History, true or feigned, should represent things as near to nature as possible. Otherwise it is a fable fit only to amuse children by the fireside, not ripened minds whose quickness penetrates everywhere. It's really pretty to see the order of the world turned upside down here. For my part, I should like to see them write a book of the loves of gentlemen, and let them talk in the language of peasants and make village jests. The thing would not be queerer than this which is its counterpart.

Here at the outset of his long career Sorel had shown himself capable of writing in a lively style, which may perhaps best be described by saying that it was everything that Mr. Saintsbury in his "Short History of French Literature" says that it was not, and not anything that he says it was. Five years later, in 1627, he continued his protest, and some may think bettered his own instruction, in "*Le Berger Extravagant*," a novel somewhat longer than "*Francion*," for in the original edition it counts 1557 as against the latter's 962 pages. As the title suggests, it mocks

the pastoral extravagances of the admirers of "Astrée" in a narrative that resembles in its essentials the "Don Quixote" of Cervantes, though Sorel denies borrowing, and indeed regards his own work with complacency as the superior. In this he is of course wrong, for indeed his satire is as extravagant as his shepherd. He calls it "a book that mocks other books, so that it is, as it were, the grave of novels and of the absurdities of poetry." His attack is directed against all idealistic fiction and poetry, and against the diversion from the practical aims of life that such reading had produced among his contemporaries. The barest outline of the story will show its general relation to "Don Quixote." Louis, the son of a silk merchant of Paris, has changed his name to Lysis, and taken to tending sheep at Saint Cloud. Here Adrian, Lysis's guardian, and Anselm, a sane young Parisian, find him in love with Charite, the maid of Anselm's beloved. The misadventure of Lysis in his attempt to imitate the shepherds of Montemayor and Urfé furnishes a subject of somewhat heartless laughter, which marks the moral inferiority of Sorel to Cervantes. Quite delicious, however, is a scene of the second book, where Anselm paints a picture of Charite that attracted the attention of the illustrator of the edition of 1639, where we may see her as Lysis had described her, her cheeks bedewed with intertwined roses and lilies, eyes radiating sunbeams, her bosom two literal hemispheres, her face as white as snow, her lips two branches of coral, eyebrows black as ebony and curved like bows, a forehead smooth as ice with a Cupid seated there on a throne, and last, but not least, hair that seemed sometimes golden chains and sometimes net and snares, or even fishing lines with real hooks to which hearts hung swinging. The episodes parody various forms of idealistic fiction, though at least one, that of the real shepherd Carmelin, in the eighth book, is crassly naturalistic; and another, that of Lysis, in the twelfth, is an unworthy attempt to ridicule the Divine Comedy. Perhaps the best bit of narrative in the whole, and certainly the best bit of character painting, is in the opening of the eleventh book; but much the most

interesting is the thirteenth, which is a discussion on the worth and nature of literary creative imagination, especially in the field of fiction. The discussion, however, is practically a monologue of Clarimond, mouthpiece of Sorel, who runs amuck in the epic prose and poetry of all ages. The Iliad, he says, distorts truth, lacks unity, and weakens interest by the frequent introduction of the gods, the Odyssey is the tale of a beggarly adventurer, Virgil is nearly as bad as Homer, and Ovid simply absurd. Ariosto and Tasso fare but little better at the hands of this iconoclast. Ronsard he regards, in spite of Malherbe, as the "best and most famous poet of France," but even his genius cannot save his imitations of the classics from sharing the faults of their models. Passing then to prose, he finds the Greek "Erotika" clumsy, and thinks the greatest error of Longus to be that he provoked so much incompetent imitation. Coming down the ages he finds Sidney's "Arcadia" ill-ordered, and criticises nearly all the prominent French novels, going out of his way to pay a graceful compliment to the charm of the personal character of Urfé, and treating his work with noteworthy mildness when we consider that the "Berger Extravagant" is obviously intended for its parody.

That no one might mistake the purport of his satire, Sorel himself furnished his book with a body of "remarques," or notes, which, as Körting observes, show "his thorough knowledge, astonishingly wide reading, his quick and keen though often squinting judgment, his wit and humor, his downright sense, and his unswerving courage," for one must not forget that he attacked men of influence and station, and in fact efforts were made to bring the author to trial and to suppress his novel as a scandal. Indeed, the central interest of the "Berger Extravagant" is not in the story, though this is often well told, but wholly in the satire. As a work of imagination "Francion" is better; as a literary document the "Berger" the more valuable. It is interesting, too, as the first foreign imitation of "Don Quixote," and the form through which "Don Quixote" found an entrance into German literature.



That Sorel contributed essentially to prevent the perversion of the middle class by false and distorted literary ideals, that by his own boldness he gave heart to others and prepared a public for the classical comedy, gives him a title to more generous recognition than has usually been accorded to "Francion" and the "Berger Extravagant." Gradually, through efforts such as his, the distinction between the ideal and real in fiction, and the justification of each, became clear. A sort of tolerant truce succeeded to the satire of the realists. Sorel himself, like the other novelists of the 1640's, lets his stories speak for themselves, and ceases to mingle directly criticism and fiction.

The struggle between realism and idealism in fiction was not to be settled in that generation, or in any other. It lay in the nature of things, and Sorel's temperament led him to renew it twenty-one years later with renewed vigor in "Polyandre," which to me shows him in his most favorable light as a critical novelist. He was now in the years that bring the philosophic mind. He is more disposed to positive creation than to negative criticism. He sees life more steadily than in "Francion," more completely too. He will teach by example rather than warn by precept. And because of this very directness it is a more complete literary manifesto of Sorel and of the fundamental tenets of realism in fiction than either "Francion" or the "Berger Extravagant." In his advertisement to the reader he defines his hero, Polyandre, as "one subtle and refined, who, turning to his profit all things, or at least many, establishes surely his fortune." In other words, he is a man who knows how to take the world as he finds it and to make the best of it. That he gives his hero a Greek name he alleges is merely to disguise the facts, which are of recent notoriety. Save for this detail he promises to tell "a true comic tale," that shall be a naïve picture of all the diverse humors of men, with sharp censure on the greater part of their faults." He selects more especially for his satire the braggart, the varnished courtier, the petty poet, the foolish lover, the lying philosopher, and the swindling alchemist, whom he proposes to paint from life,

though he regards the task as so difficult that it "has till now turned French authors from composing books like this, so that we hardly have two of such a kind that are original to France [namely, as Körting suggests, 'Francion' and the 'Berger'], for the rest are translations of Spanish books," an interesting recognition of the chief source of French realism. On the other hand, he is appalled by the "ten thousand volumes" of idealistic romance that are eagerly devoured; but he knows that, besides the readers of these, "there are other people who would rather see little Parisian adventures or promenades, such as may happen to themselves or to people of their acquaintance, because that seems to them more natural and more credible." And such a novel he proposes to write.

The hero is a Parisian, and scenes of Paris life are its subject. The plot is unimportant, and the story is but little harmed by being unfinished. It is indeed rather a series of sketches than a connected whole; but nowhere in this century, except in Furetière's later "Roman Bourgeois," shall we find such a vivid and good-humored treatment of the life of the middle and lower classes in the *grand siècle*. It thus forms a most worthy and valuable counterpart to the picture of the aristocracy involved in Madeleine de Scudéry's "Cyrus" and "Clélie." Even the language and style smack of the street and the shop, as the following description of a ball given by a well-to-do citizen may testify better than any analytic description:

The house where they were having the ball belonged to a business man—that is to say, a man of money, and "in the swim," as they say nowadays—who, having recently married and seeing himself well off, wished that his good fortune should appear to all, not thinking that he was perfectly happy unless other people knew it. One must suppose that he wished, first of all, that his wealth should be known by his magnificence, and people added besides that, having married a very fair woman, he was in the humor that he wanted people to see her, glorying in possessing her after she had refused many others. His parlor was covered with the most exquisite tapestry, and he had glass chandeliers fastened close together to the ceiling, which by their sparkling reflection redoubled the brightness of the lights they bore. There were twelve violinists, the best in Paris, mounted on a little stage which they had put in a corner of the room. Many chairs and stools were placed all around. The dames and damosels of the best quality were

seated in the first rank. And there were some women who for beauty and youth rivaled their daughters. They formed more than a semicircle, which left space to dance, and behind were the older ladies, who by their dress and studied countenance showed that they still pretended to good looks, and did not take themselves for rubbish yet. Some men were seated irregularly among them, and toward the door there was a great crowd of them standing. The most gallant, among whom was Neophile, refusing chairs, though they were of rank, spread their cloaks on the ground and went to recline at the feet of the fair ladies, where they thought themselves too much honored, and now some, now others [of the men], were taken out to dance.

The arrival of some unexpected people in this contracted space raised a great noise. They were men wearing swords, who went everywhere without being asked, and troubled the tranquility and pleasure of the assembly. They took great liberties, and spoke so loud that they became importunate. They imagined that all there was beneath them, since it was only an assembly of city people, and because the young ladies whom they addressed showed to them less consideration than to some young people of their acquaintance they determined to avenge themselves and to mock their rivals, especially one named Berynte, who danced often and swaggered (*faisait l'étendu*) too much for their taste. At the second dance that he led Laplanthe, one of these bold fellows, took a place and followed him as though he had been his shadow. . . . Berynte tried to take it as a joke, and to let him see that he did not care for that; but it did tire him, and some girls were ashamed to dance with him, fearing that they would be laughed at. . . . But he (*i. e.*, Laplanthe) did not notice a broken tile that was under his feet, and that somebody had perhaps slipped there on purpose; so he made a long slide, and would have fallen flat had he not held himself up by a chair arm. Many kept from bursting out laughing, so as not to irritate his brutality. . . . He, however, began to assail Berynte with insults and calumnies, and created other scandal, while the dance continued, for they thought it shameful to stop because of swordsmen. . . . What displeased most was that two or three of the girls, having asked them to dance so as to see if they knew how, some had danced with ridiculous postures and others had refused outright. . . . There was one so presumptuous that when a lawyer's daughter asked him to dance with her he said in a disdainful tone: "I think, my good miss, that you can't know that I am Calidon. I've never danced except at the Louvre balls. Do you take me for some secretary or auditor? What can disguise me so?" Then, after more chaffing of the same type, he comes at last to blows with another *gens d'épée* whom he took for a bourgeois. So both were ejected; but they fought in the street, and he was mortally wounded. But [continues Sorel] most of those who had been at the ball were hardly more moved at his death than at his wounds, it being an ordinary thing in Paris to hear talk of duels, encounters, and murders. No one of them had meddled with the quarrel, and besides, the fight was outside, so that the ball continued none the less for some time.

This extract, though much condensed, will perhaps show

the sort of light “Polyandre” throws on the early years of Louis, or, if you will, the age of Corneille. Wealth has not yet brought refinement. The rich citizens are plebeian, the young aristocracy are brawlers. What need there was, and would be for generations to come, of the refining influences that emanated from the Hôtel de Rambouillet and the salons of Maintenon, Lafayette, and Scudéry, for all of their faults and foibles! Where else was France to look for refinement? Was it at the theaters? Read the plays, and consider. Or was it perhaps at the court? We have still the memories of Saint-Simon to answer that question. If Sorel had no other claim to our notice than that his work justified much and excused more of the aims of the gentle Madeleine and her friends, “Polyandre” would well deserve the attention of those who are not content to be witty, but desire to be just.

B. W. WELLS.